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Ongoing priorities and themes

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Commonwealth Secretariat

Summary

The present report of the Commonwealth Secretariat is its first. The report describes policies, activities and plans regarding indigenous issues.

Commonwealth approach to indigenous issues

1. The Commonwealth, as a community of 53 member States sharing histories and the values of development and democracy, recognized in 1979 that indigenous peoples may require special provisions to improve their socio-economic situations. The key statement on indigenous issues by heads of Government was made at the Lusaka Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1979, where they recognized, in the Declaration of the Commonwealth on Racism and Racial Prejudice, that "special attention" needed to be paid to "the problems of indigenous minorities".

2. The Commonwealth also recognized the needs and rights of indigenous peoples in the report of the Commonwealth Expert Group on Development and Democracy which was considered by the Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja in 2003. Entitled "Making democracy work for pro-poor development", the report recognized the economic, social and political constraints faced by indigenous peoples. Particular mention was made of indigenous people's poor health status and their often constrained access to land. By emphasizing that democracy requires the

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strengthening and preservation of a political culture which respects human rights, including the group or collective rights of indigenous peoples, the report underscored the need for Commonwealth Governments to heed the special concerns and rights of indigenous peoples and strive to meet their needs. The report also highlighted the need for policies that contribute to cultural diversity and stressed the importance of the political representation of marginalized groups, including indigenous peoples.

3. At their seventh meeting, in Fiji in 2004, Commonwealth Ministers Responsible for Women's Affairs recognized for the first time the particular discriminations and disadvantages faced by indigenous women and their communities. Ministers committed themselves to work on the issue through the recommendations outlined in the Commonwealth Plan of Action for Gender Equality 2005-2015. The Plan of Action thus made a commitment to promote "the rights of indigenous peoples, especially women, in political, social, economic and cultural spheres".

4. The Gender Section of the Social Transformation Programmes Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat is mandated to assist member Governments and other key stakeholders in implementing the Plan of Action. The convening in mid-2006 of a pan-Commonwealth conference on gender, youth and indigenous peoples is to be the first step by the Commonwealth in addressing indigenous issues from gender and youth perspectives. The conference will seek to identify the issues facing indigenous women and young people in Commonwealth countries and identify ways to advance their situation at various levels. Most of the background papers for the conference have been written by indigenous peoples.

5. The objectives of the pan-Commonwealth conference are to:

(a) Raise policy awareness on the multiple discriminations faced by indigenous communities, particularly women, men and young people, and offer a holistic perspective on indigenous peoples' rights;

(b) Provide a gender dimension to the socio-economic situations experienced by indigenous peoples;

(c) Forward to Governments substantive recommendations for improving the lives of indigenous peoples through policy formulation and practice.

6. In meeting the above objectives, the conference will seek to highlight the interconnectedness of indigenous peoples' situations, the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and the realization of their human rights. The Conference will also highlight that the attainment of equitable natural resource distribution and sustainable biodiversity management will contribute to the preservation of indigenous knowledge and culture.